DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 092 980 CS 201 422

AUTHOR Duncan, John
TITLE The Necessity for an Investigation of Dialect Writing.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (25th, Anaheim, California, April 4-6, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Dialect Studies; Linguistics; Negro Culture; *Negro Dialects; Nonstandard Dialects; *Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS *Black English

ABSTRACT

The statement by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication affirming the student's right to his own language--his dialect--poses a challenge deserving further research, especially as it concerns the classroom situation. Black English, a dialect with linguistic principles whose roots can be traced to West Africa, has not been accepted by most educators although it has been shown to bee a logical mode of expression. The effect of focusing standard English onto students accustomed to using black English has been negligible. Moreover, the proposal that children be taught to read and write in their own dialects and then be allowed to switch to standard English after they have grasped the principle of correspondence between written letters and spoken language will not preserve our heritage of dialects. Implicit in the right to language is the responsibility for communicability, but until more is written and understood in black English, many questions remain unanswered concerning its communicability. (JM)

ED 092980

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

RECEIVED
JUL 1974
CLEARINGHOUSE
INSTRUCTION

THE NECESSITY FOR AN INVESTIGATION OF DIALECT WRITING

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

by

John Duncan

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
John Duncan
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

A Paper Presented to the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Anaheim, California
April 1974

CS 201 422

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

On March 22, 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed the following resolution:

> We affirm the student's right to his own language--the dialect of his nurture in which he finds his identity and style. Any claim that only one dialect is acceptable should be viewed as an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another, not as either true or sound advice to speakers or writers, nor as moral advice to humans. A nation which is proud of its diverse heritage and of its cultural and racial variety ought to preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly the need for teachers to have such training as will enable them to support this goal of diversity and this right of the student to his own language.

I intend to examine this statement in an effort to determine to what extent it is based on sound linguistic principles applicable to the actual classroom situation.

The statement is in direct opposition to what has been the accepted view of dialects held by most educators--a view based on the theory of "verbal deprivation." This theory, as put forth by Carl Bereiter, states that "the language of culturally deprived children . . . is not merely an underdeveloped version of standard English, but is a basically non-logical mode of expressive behavior."[1] If Mr. Bereiter is correct,

---

[1]Carl Bereiter et al., "An Academically Oriented Pre-School for Culturally Deprived Children," Pre-School Education Today, edited by Fred Hechinger (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 113.

it must be the duty of teachers to instruct their students in standard English, thus denying these students the very right which the Executive Committee of the CCCC has affirmed.

In examining the differences between these two points of view, one must first specify what is meant by the word 'dialect.' J. L. Dillard, in Black English, defines dialect as "a collection of idiolects; that is, the speech pattern of a number of individuals whose language is similar in some significant way."[2] Idiolect is the characteristic speech pattern of an individual. This definition is perhaps quite general; but I feel that any other one would lead to further semantic difficulty, and perhaps to a faulty conclusion.

The first and most obvious problem raised by Dillard's definition is that, if dialect is no more than the common ground of certain idiolects, then we might as well say that every student has a right to his own idiolect. In this case, there would be no need to teach standard English at all, since every individual would be an expert in his own idiolect. But I do not think that this objection will really bear much scrutiny. The imagined situation is in fact an impossibility. How many English teachers, grammar book in hand, have stood up before their classes and declared; "That language is just fine on the street corner, but it simply will not do in the classroom." The point is that idiolects do not have to be

---

[2]J. L. Dillard, Black English (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 300.

standardized in the classroom; they are standardized on the street corner. Any speaker of any language must learn the rules of his own dialect, else he will be unable to communicate with any other speakers. It is these rules which make idiolects "similar in some significant way." Proof of the existence of any dialect is contingent upon the existence of a regular set of such rules.

The majority of Mr. Bereiter's "culturally deprived children" probably speak a dialect which is referred to either as Black English or as Negro non-standard English. In this paper I will concentrate on this dialect.

The existence of Black English as a dialect with its own complicated system of rules and workable forms is not accepted by most educators; rather, it is seen as an inferior version of standard English. Certainly Mr. Bereiter does not acknowledge its existence. I will not try here to prove the existence of Black English; for, to prove something which has already been proven is pointless. Dillard's Black English traces the dialect back to its roots in the Portuguese settlements of West Africa, examines the differences between Black English and Southern English in the United States, and identifies a number of the linguistic principles by which Black English functions. I would, however, like to borrow an example from Dillard, not simply to show how one of these rules functions, but to point out how it reflects upon teaching and the

statement of the CCCC.[3]

Dillard refers to a colleague at Columbia who, when testing teachers of disadvantaged children, employed the same type of drills that the teachers had been using with their classes--only he tested them on the structure of the language which the children spoke, Black English. The linguist would say, "He sick," then ask the teacher to give the negative form, which is, "He ain' sick." On the other hand, the negative form of the sentence, "He be sick," is "He don't be sick." Here the word "be" stands for habitual action; therefore one could say, "He be sick all the time" or "He sick right now," but not "He sick all the time" or "He be sick right now." Since they were unfamiliar with what goes on at the street corner and had not been listening to their students, the teachers were unable to give the correct responses. It is not difficult to see that this is exactly what happens in reverse in the classroom with a white teacher and black students.

Even when the existence of Black English is acknowledged, there are those who contend that the language is non-logical. William Labov, in his study of non-standard English, has attacked this contention, and I use his data in answering the contention. One of the young black students with whom Labov worked in New York City gave the following explanation

---

[3]The example is found in Dillard, Black English, p. 271.

of why, if there were a God, he would be a white God:

> Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause the average whitey out here got everything, you dig? And the nigger ain't got shit, y'know? Y'understan'? So--um--for--in order for that to happen, you know it ain't no black God that's doin' that bullshit.

The choice of words may not be precise, but the logic is indisputable. In contrast, Labov cites the answer of a college-educated black man to a question about dreams:

> I do believe that there is such a thing that a person can put himself in a state of mind (Mhm), or that--er--something could be given them to intoxicate them in a certain--to a certain frame of mind--that--that could actually be considered witchcraft.[4]

This sentence was the sixth and last one in the man's answer; but he rambled on to this point on his own. The sentence by itself says practically nothing and is reflective of the answer as a whole. Learning standard English has hardly made this man more logical; indeed, he sounds much less logical than the younger speaker of Black English.

The assumption that Black English is a non-logical mode of expression should not be attributed to bigoted educators; rather, it stems from some basic misunderstandings about the nature of Black English. These same misunderstandings lead to failure in the classroom, which in turn leads educators

---

[4] William Labov, "The Logic of Non-standard English," The Florida FL Reporter, Spring/Summer 1969, p. 66.

to assume that black urban children are culturally deprived, hence suffering from "verbal deprivation" when they enter school. The process is circular and offers no hope to the black student. Labov reports that in one of his repetition tests black students were asked to repeat the sentence, "Ask Albert if he knows how to play basketball." They repeated, "Axe Albert do he know how to play basketball." But when the sentence was changed to "Ask Albert whether he knows how to play basketball," they were incapable of coming up with anything except sentences like "Axe Albert . . . whether do he know how to play basketball." The word "whether" does not signal an embedded question in Black English, whereas "if" could serve this function.[5] Such structures are basic to the teaching of standard English. For the black child entering school the switch to standard English is not simply a matter of learning new words, but a matter of completely changing the structure, both surface and underlying, of his own language. And when the child leaves the school grounds, the new structure learned in the classroom does not apply. What is the effect of forcing standard English onto these students? Labov concludes:

> One can force the issue by demanding full and explicit statements from children and repressing their own vernacular forms. But it seems certain that one does so only at the cost of sharpening the

---

[5] William Labov, The Study of Nonstandard English (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969), p. 46.

> cultural conflict which already exists. The resistance to the school situation on the part of the vernacular speaker can be repressed in the early grades, but it is very likely that it will return with renewed vigor in the fourth and fifth grades, with damaging results to the educational process.[6]

Of course, we do not need the evidence and conclusions of a few linguists to convince us that the use of standard English in black schools has not worked. The system has already failed the test of time. It has not worked. The Federal "Headstart" program, which attempted to impose standard English on black urban preschool children, has not been productive. In fact, the large outpouring of Federal funds to help minority education in general has met with only minimal success. The time is here to look for another solution.

Apparently, then, each student does have a "right to his own language," and insistence upon the use of standard English in the public schools is "an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another." So far, the statement of the CCCC seems valid. Yet, what does it really mean to say that a student has a "right to his own language"? Does this mean that he should be allowed to write in his own dialect and at the same time learn to speak and read standard English? Does it mean that all school textbooks should be written in dialects other than standard English? It is easy to say that

---

[6]Labov, Study of Nonstandard English, p. 50.

what others have done is wrong, but difficult to say what we could do that might be right.

What would happen if all public school textbooks were written in dialects other than standard English? First, we must assume that such a project could be accomplished, which is doubtful. Nevertheless, I will make this assumption. We shall rewrite the textbooks. Black people will retain their language both in speech and in writing. Black English will become the language of the lower class--even to a larger extent than now prevails. As a result, misunderstanding and segregation among the races will undoubtedly increase. The prospects for such a project do not appear to be sound.

Equally absurd is the idea that children can be taught to read one dialect while learning to write another. The confusion that such a system would cause within the mind of any child would be incredible. What is more, the social problems incidental to the language difference would persist. "It's all right for you to write in Black English, but anything worth reading is written in our language."

Dillard proposes a solution to our linguistic dilemma based on the work of William Stewart at the Education Study Center in Washington, D.C. The idea is that children be taught to read and write in their own dialects, then switch to standard English after they have grasped the fundamentals:

> In principle, once the beginning reader has learned the principle of correspondence between written

> letters and spoken language, transition to the reading of Standard English should be much easier. (Practically speaking, the main reason for the transition to Standard English is that there is little or nothing written in Black English.) It is obvious that a person who is literate in English does not have as far to go in learning to read French as does a person who not only does not speak French but does not know how to read his native English.[7]

Perhaps Dillard is right, if we want to teach black children to read and write standard English. Such an approach, however, will not preserve our "heritage of dialects." Dillard may be working with the same sort of circular logic that has so long hindered the efforts of educators. For, if little or nothing is being written in Black English now, certainly there will be less if black children are taught to write standard English. Dillard does see some possibility for the future of Black English in print, pointing to such persons as Ameer Baraka and Langston Hughes who have written in the dialect for many years. But most of this work has been done in the creative fields, and specifically with dialogue, in drama and poetry. What would happen if someone tried to write an essay about Plato's Meno in black dialect? Could it be done? If so, could it be understood apart from the black community and a few linguists?

The truth is that nobody really seems to know. Labov ignores the question when he reaches it; Dillard postulates on

---

[7]Dillard, Black English, p. 284.

some possibilities; Bereiter does not even seem to recognize that there is any question. Educated guesses can be made. There is a good chance, for instance, that with minimal effort Black English could be understood by non-speakers. No doubt anyone with a B.A. in English could read and understand these lines:

> And in hymself he lough right at the wo
> Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
> And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
> The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
> And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.
> And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,
> There as Mercury sorted hym to dwelle.[8]

Yet, when a group of English teachers in New York City were given the following passage,

> Lawd, we ain't what we wanna be; we ain't what we oughta be; we sho' nuff ain't what we lak to be; but thank the Lawd, we ain't what we was.

not one of them recognized the fact that he was reading a prayer.[9]

Educated guesses are one thing; proof is quite another. The only way to determine whether someone can write an essay in Black English on Plato's Meno is to have someone do it. Perhaps the task is actually impossible. We shall never know

---

[8] Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, Book V, lines 1821-27.

[9] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Linguistics, a Revolution in Teaching (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 189.

until we experiment. Such experiments should reveal quite a bit. For instance, if a conversation were to be taped while a speaker of Black English was discussing Plato, and the speaker used the word "ask" (pronounced "axe"), would that same speaker transcribe his word to paper as "ask" or "axe"? Since the letters are only symbols, very likely he would write "ask." Such a pronunciation is no harder to understand than standard English "island." Black English may be much easier to read when written by a vernacular speaker than when written by a linguist or as dialogue in a play. Would someone writing in Black English drop the final "t" from "ain't"? We might assume he would--perhaps because we assume that writing in Black English would be more phonetically logical than writing in standard English.

Many areas need to be explored. Can people write in Black English at any level? If so, could other scholars read what is written without too much difficulty? If we affirm the student's "right to his own language," shall we still teach standard English in the classroom? Beginning at what level? If children's books are to be published in Black English, what symbols should be used for those sounds which the children know as their vocabulary?

Hopefully, linguistic research in the area of dialect will shed light on these troubling matters. William Stewart's work with black children in the nation's capital should be helpful when his results are evaluated. At this time I believe

it is impossible to say what we really mean by a student's "right to his own language." In this country, can our "heritage of dialects" be perpetuated without obstructing that communication which is so vital among racial groups in a pluralistic society? The affirmation by the Conference of College Composition and Communication sounds very ~~slow~~ nice; yet it really suggests very little that can be implemented within our prevailing situation and given the limits of our knowledge at this time.

In order to answer some of the questions that the CCCC statement raises, I propose that appropriate research be undertaken--for example, that a person fluent in Black English write an essay in his own dialect on Plato's Meno. Implicit in the right to language is the responsibility to demonstrate its communicability. If this criterion of a dialect cannot be met, the right is hardly justifiable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bereiter, Carl, et al. "An Academically Oriented Pre-School for Culturally Deprived Children." In Pre-School Education Today, edited by Fred Hechinger. New York: Doubleday, 1966.

Dillard, J. L. Black English. New York: Random House, 1972.

Labov, William. "The Logic of Non-standard English," The Florida FL Reporter, Spring/Summer, 1969.

_____. The Study of Nonstandard English. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969.

Postman, Neil, and Weingartner, Charles. Linguistics, a Revolution in Teaching. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966.